

# Dialects of design education: exploring an appropriate approach to contemporary interiors in historical buildings

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## ABSTRACT:

Due to economic adversities brought on by the global recession, rapid urbanisation of the developing world and the need for sustainable design, a pressing need has arisen to incorporate appropriate and meaningful contemporary interiors in historical buildings. Initial informants of this study identified a need for interior design students to develop awareness and suitable skills to design such regenerating contemporary interiors and that interior design curricula include these critical-analytical skills. This paper provides a conceptual framework that hopes to assist students to achieve the desired coherence contemporary interiors owe their historical environments through the design of multisensory environments. This will be done by exploring the notions of small narratives, neo-plasticism, stratification and detailing. By probing how these principles may be found in two case studies, Castelvechio in Verona and Museum van de Caab outside Cape Town, this study hopes to indicate how multisensory environments may be analysed and designed.

**Key words: Interior Design, Multisensory Design, Stratification**

## THE EYE AND I: OCULARCENTRISM AND ALIENATION IN INTERIORS TODAY

*'We live in a society of alienation, detachment and solitude. Brought on by the rapid growth of technology, an ocularcentric bias culture has been generated, resulting in pathology of the other senses' (Pallasmaa, 1996: 9).*

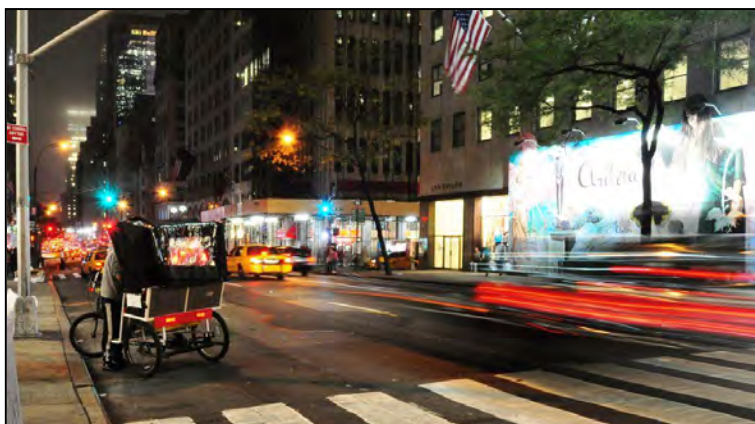


Figure 1: Rapidity



Figure 2: Alienation

Historical buildings are by definition meaningful and provide us with cultural identity, a sense of place and belonging. Due to the pressing need for functional adaptation, brought on by the global recession as well as rapid urbanization, these buildings are often stripped from their meaning internally, and replaced by contemporary universal interiors. Stripping these buildings internally

and replacing them with generic interiors may be regarded as a rupture from the past and negation of the buildings' 'sensory' characteristics. In order to combat this phenomenon of universalisation, Kenneth Frampton (1983:470) argues that through the incorporation of the other senses in addition to that of sight, it is possible to maintain the historical significance of the building (O'Neill, 2001: 3). The Venice Charter (1964) adopted by the International Council on Monuments and Sites states: 'The concept of a historic monument embraces not only the single architectural work but also the urban or rural setting in which is found the evidence of a particular civilisation, a significant development of a historic event.' This point has tremendous merit in Cape Town as its historical landscape forms a significant part of South Africa's contemporary cultural identity.

To take into account the cultural significance of historical buildings and the homogeneous qualities of generic contemporary interiors, the training of interior designers should be addressed. It was on this premise that a project was set to our third year interior design students to design a contemporary interior in a heritage building. The building is situated in De Waterkant, a historical and culturally rich area in Cape Town. Upon reflection of the project the negation of sensory considerations became evident, as the students' work predominantly focused on visually seductive imagery (Fig. 3 and 4). This 'ocularcentric' trend within the build environment refers to the notion of vision taking predominance over all other senses. Attention is given to colour, materials, lighting and shape generally without considering the other bodily senses. These non-visual stimuli contribute to the strengthening of the identity of place and enhance our visual perception (Yu, 2009: 1). Pallasmaa (2005: 193) criticises the creation and manipulation of visuals and graphics in computer imaging and how this contributes to architecture becoming estranged from its multi-sensory nature. Furthermore, he argues that designing with empathy and imagination becomes less important because the use of computers as design tools merely assist in the manipulation of visuals: 'Focusing on visibility, results in ignorant designers with regards to architecture's social, functional, economic and technological responsibilities to society' (ibid).

These arguments resonate with the third year project discussed above, where emphasis was placed on abstract concepts rather than drawing on emotive and intuitive informants for the design. In this regard, the students were designing incongruent and impractical environments for the sake of staying true to abstract concepts.

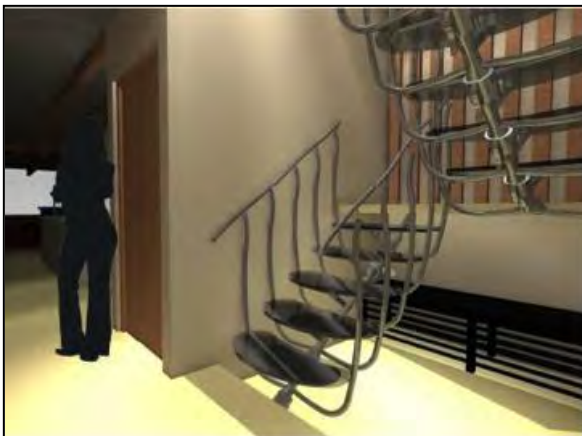


Figure 3: The 'spine' staircase



Figure 4: Inauthentic and unpopulated heritage interior

Pallasmaa affirms that the build-environment is losing touch with tactility, the human scale and details specifically shaped for the body, giving rise to alienated and lifeless environments that only speak to the visual sense. The cold, reflective materials in modern environments become austere in its presence, blocking all haptic engagement in its fight for immortality. Natural materials on the other hand are haptic in nature, mortal in its own right. This mortality allows us to engage with these materials on a multisensory level. In the end, he argues, all matter exists in the continuum of time (Pallasmaa, 1996: 21).



Figure 5: The eye and the visual world



Figure 6 and 7: Uninhabited interior renderings

Tuan argues that experience is a term encompassing the different mediums we use in order to understand and construct reality, making use of our direct and passive senses of smell, touch and taste together with our active visual perception and our implied formation of symbolization (Tuan, 1977: 18). This implies for a sensitive and 'multisensory' approach to design that could be implemented in contemporary interiors within historical contexts, involving all the bodily senses. Through these, it can be ensured that cognizance is given to the historical building, and the topistic characteristics of the locale and its content resonates within the viewer on a multisensory level.

## A PLACE FOR THE SENSES IN INTERIOR DESIGN

O'Neill stresses the importance of incorporating the senses when conceptualising spatial design in her article *Corporeal Experience: A Haptic Way of Knowing*, (2001) pointing out how designers disregard the non-visual senses within the built environment. This argument is also supported by Pallasmaa (1996) when he calls for 'architecture of the senses', saying that architecture is becoming increasingly retinal biased, primarily focusing on seducing the eye (Fig. 5), whilst other senses become secondary objectives. This becomes evident when looking at computer renderings and photographs done by interior designers, often left unpopulated (Fig. 6 and 7) (ibid).

*Haptic* perception is a term used in psychology to describe a holistic way of understanding three-dimensional space (Piaget & Inhelder, 1956). This holistic system of environmental perception extends beyond visual spatial perception. O'Neil draws on the notion of *haptic* perception and how it is informed by physical bodily interaction within a space through geographic contact and movement. Furthermore, she argues that *haptic* sensibilities should be taken into consideration in spatial design curricula (O'Neill, 2001: 3). According to Pallasmaa (2005), *haptic* architecture is essential, as this approach pays attention to detail, therefore engaging with the body and all its senses (Shirazi, 2009: 129). In encouraging *haptic* engagement with our immediate environment these spaces can be realized and perceived fully. 'The tactile sense connects us with time and tradition; through marks of touch we shake the hands with countless generations (Pallasmaa, 1996: 33).' It therefore becomes crucial for the incorporation of the senses within built environment curricula, to create 'sensory architecture' (Shirazi, 2009: 128).

Insight into the experiential sphere of the body may be found in phenomenology, particularly as set forth by Merleau-Ponty (1964) and his writings on phenomenology of perception. 'These senses fuel our emotions, making our experience of the space more memorable (Leone, 2008: 56) Hereby, perception is not a sum of visual, tactile, and audible givens, but instead one perceives in a total way with one's whole being (Merleau-Ponty, 1964: 18). He states: 'we can only perceive and experience the world through our whole body as it is with our bodies that we exists within the world, giving rise to the notion of perception within which we carry body knowledge, obtained through our interaction with that around us' (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 239). Drawing on Gestalt psychology as well as Husserlian phenomenology, Merleau-Ponty argues that 'human experience is

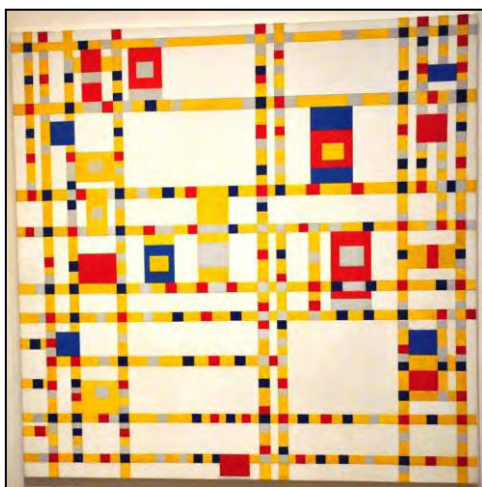


an immensely complex weave of consciousness, body and environment, best approached by holistic philosophy' (Moran, 2002: 413). For interior designers, this holistic spatial conceptualisation may be fragmented into a set of small narratives.

## FEELING THROUGH FRAGMENTATION: TOWARDS A MULTISENSORY DESIGN APPROACH

A narrative, in its broadest sense, is the means by which a story is told (Ryan, 2005). It is a semiotic construction that is threefold, consisting of a narrator an action / event and an audience / receiver (Shirazi, 167). French philosopher Lyotard (1984: 60), a key figure in the postmodern movement, gives a distinct definition about narrative. Referring to Wittgenstien's 'language games', he contends that there is no grand statement of philosophical truth. He argues that a 'grand narrative', is an overarching story that describes and comments on sets of other stories. In our multicultural, post-colonial world, he feels that: 'the grand narrative has lost its credibility, regardless of what mode of unification it uses, regardless of whether it is a speculative narrative or a narrative of emancipation' (ibid, 36). Smaller narratives or sub-narratives may therefore become valuable recourses in architectural design, both externally and internally. 'Architectural narratives are therefore', according to Shirazi (182), 'deeply related to how strongly the architect enters sub-narratives in architectural elements, and how receivers appropriate these sub-narratives and make their own perceptions'.

To investigate how sets of small narratives may be employed to create multisensory environments, the notions of *neo-plasticism*, *stratification* and *detailing* provides insight. *Neo-plasticism* was a Dutch artistic movement also known as De Stijl. It consisted of organisation of the spatial structure into horizontal and vertical planes, which in turn enables elements to act as individual strata. Italian architect Carlo Scarpa was an avid follower of the De Stijl movement, and its influences are clearly evident in work (Schultz, 2010: 79). Crippa concurs: 'Stylistically, many of the principles of neo-plasticism can be found in Italian architect Carlo Scarpa's intervention in Castelveccchio' (1984: 40). Through his horizontal and vertical organization of spatial structure, Scarpa was able to subdivide walls, floors, and ceilings into fields, to do partial interventions, to leave elements visible, or in some cases, to cover them completely. He works with cladding that is applied to the floor or wall; the fact that these are detached is clearly revealed by the formation of detail, such as framing or surface structure. The theme of the joint has central significance for the autonomy of the elements and becomes the symbol of connection and separation alike (Schultz, 2010: 79). Further principles of neo-plasticism are as set out by Watkins: 'Coloration must be in the primary colours of red, blue and yellow or the non-colours of black, gray and white. Surfaces must be rectangular planes or prisms. Aesthetic balance must be achieved and this is done through the use of opposition. Compositional elements must be straight lines or rectangular areas. Balance and rhythm are enhanced by relationships of proportion and location.' (Watkins, online) (Fig. 8).



Figures 8 - 10: Orchestrating strata.

The principles of De Stijl are elaborated on by the artist, Piet Mondrian: 'As a pure representation of the human mind art will express itself in an aesthetically purified, that is to say abstract form.... This new plastic idea will ignore the particulars of appearance, and find its expression in the abstraction of form and colour, that is to say, in the straight line and the clearly defined primary colour' (Wilson, 1991: 144). In architecture this allows for the creation of smaller narratives, the 'organisation of the spatial structure into horizontal and vertical planes (Fig. 9 - 10), which may in turn consist of individual strata, making it possible for Scarpa to subdivide walls, floors, and ceiling into fields, to do partial interventions' (Ibid.). He also makes use of material matter in its purest form within his architectural interventions, principles that link to the usage of primary colours within De Stijl art, where paint is used in its rudimentary form.

*Stratification* is a term used for the principle of layering (Fig. 11 - 13). Interior spatial volume is constructed by combining floor, wall and ceiling planes. The creation of rooms or divisions within this interior using structural matter, whilst allowing the space to be experienced as a whole, be it physically or visually defines the term stratification (Schultz, 2010: 129). In their book *Transparentz* (1968), Rowe and Slutzky reveal the conceptual complexity of stratification. They use it for the analysis of paintings and also applied it to Scarpa's Villa in Garches. Where the latter exemplifies the concept of *spatial* stratification. Stratification as they see it may be used as the 'tool of contemplation' (Rowe and Slutzky, 1968: 48) that reveals the spatial interrelations in architecture. Spatial layering in the work of Le Corbusier is also applied to individual segments and is dependent on the use of architectonic elements that are homogenous in form and have no direct narrative bearing on references or traditions (Schultz, 2010: 15). Scarpa himself writes: 'to achieve anything, we have to invent relationships.' (Scarpa, 1976). Spatial stratification or stratification of material do not only serve to create space but also to formulate a certain atmosphere that links tradition and the past with the present....His strata of material serve to define space and transport narrative components involving the locale, history or material (Schultz, 2010: 16).



Figures 11 - 13: The art of layering.

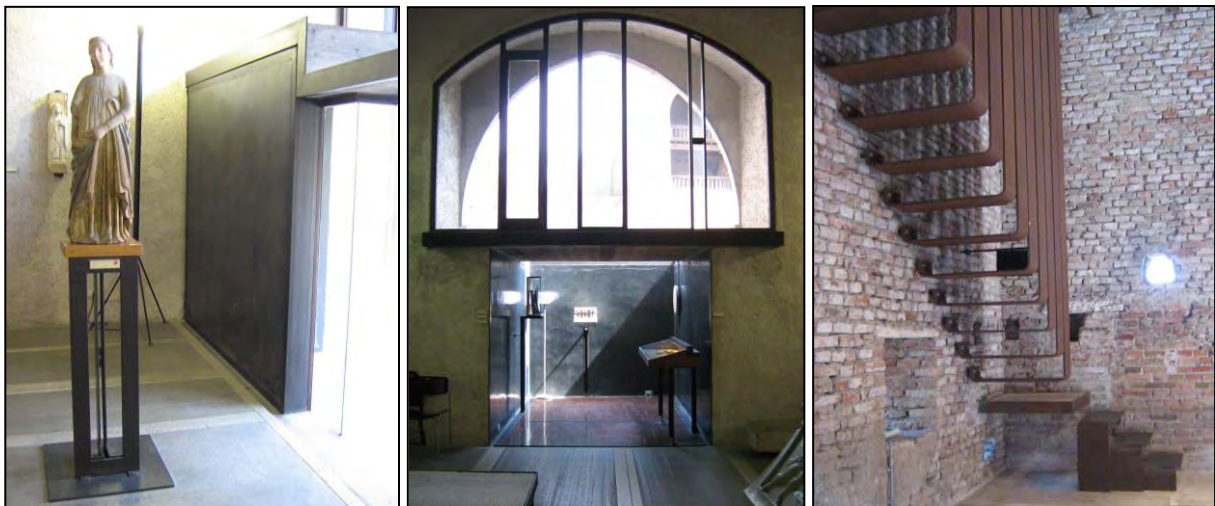
*Details* intrigue the human being due to their complex nature and our inability to remember them for long. Details remain therefore always new, prolonging our engagement with them (Malnar & Vodvarka, 2004: 172). Details thus not only form part of décor and ornamentation but functions as mechanisms of rhythm within a space, adjourning movement. An environment devoid of detail encourages a quicker progression through space, whilst those comprised from details initiates a prolonging there-of. Details furthermore facilitate identity and hierarchy within interior environments (Ibid: 174). Scarpa's work focuses on details and the joining of elements within buildings in their purest form. It exhibits haptic spatial design where attention to detail is evident within the doors, staircases, windows, handles and junctions between these elements (Fig.14 - 16). In its attention to detail these buildings engages with the body and all its senses (Murphy, 1990:1).



Figures 14 - 16: Details, establishing identity and hierarchy. Castelvecchio: Verona, Italy.

## OF WINE AND WARRIORS: NEO PLASTICISM, STRATIFICATION AND DETAILS IN MUSEUM VAN DE CAAB, CAPE TOWN + CASTELVECCHIO, VERONA

How neo-plasticism, stratification and detailing can facilitate the design of multisensory interiors will be analyzed in two case studies in the following categories: *thresholds, floor, wall and roof planes, topographical layouts and exhibit mechanisms*. In Castelvecchio the principles of neoplasticism is clearly evident within the various *threshold* conditions throughout the museum. In the façade new asymmetric windows and doors are introduced and in juxtaposition to the existing gothic thresholds, clearly defining the new from the old. The principles are evident within the selection of material matter, making use of glass, steel and pitch pine in its original colour. Stopping interior floor finishes short of doorways allows for a clear break between the exterior and interior environment, symbolising the clear black line of demarcation one finds in De Stijl art (Fig. 17 and 18). Staircases are modeled portraying clear vertical and horizontal elements, bringing rhythm into the interior, highlighting the vertical transition between floors (Fig. 19). Here, *floor planes* also exhibit the principles of neoplasticism through the introduction of borders as grids, as defined by the art movement (Fig. 20-21). The change in flooring material through colour and texture activates the tactile sense within the viewer's feet. The junction between wall and floor has been addressed by means of a negative seam inspired by the moat surrounding the castle (Frampton, 2001:19) (Fig. 22).



Figures 17 - 19: Thresholds, unifying the known and the unknown. Castelvecchio: Verona, Italy





Figures 20 - 22: Floor slabs in the Castelvecchio: Verona, Italy

In selected areas of Museum van de Caab the primary construction of the *wall planes* are exposed. This relates to the principles of neoplasticism as the colours and materiality exists in their pure and simplified forms (Figure 23). This contributes to the historical nature and understanding of the building while enforcing its authenticity. In Castelvecchio all additional walls are finished in hues and variations of red or blue's relating to the primary colours found within De Stijl. These coloured walls accentuate the paintings. They are all bordered with black frames, similar to the artwork of the movement (Figures 24 & 25). Walls within the museum are used as methods of demarcation, directing the viewer through the space. All the walls are geometric in shape linking back to these principles. In the *roof planes* of Museum van de Caab the ceiling within the museum also exhibits traces of the principles of De Stijl. The material matter is used in its primary source. New beams elements are rectangular and geometric in composition. This facilitates a clear differentiation between the old and new, a clear example of dissymmetry. Aesthetic balance is created due to the contrast that exists between the two elements whilst balance and rhythm is established through the spacing of the beams. The ceiling is bordered by means of a black line, which also facilitates the general lighting of the museum.



Figure 23: Wall:  
Museum van de Caab



Figures 24 and 25: Walls in Castelvecchio: Verona, Italy

The *topography* within Castelvecchio, as shown in the images below (Fig. 26 - 28), illustrates a clear resemblance to that of the principles in De Stijl. Here the rooms in the statue gallery are clearly defined by rectangular patterns divided by straight lines. The rooms are bordered with the 'moat' detailed skirting illustrated above. The exhibition content platforms, black and rectangular in nature, are spaced asymmetrical within the room. Rhythm and balance are created with the parallel lines running across rooms. *Multi-sensory engagement* takes place when standing at the statue of Cangrande, ruler of Verona in 1277. The occupant engages with the statue directly, whilst the river sound can be heard from outside (Murphy, 1990:40). This sensory engagement strengthens the notion of cultural identity of Italy and Verona itself.



Figure 26 -28: Topography illustration of Castelvecchio: Verona, Italy

Topography within Museum van de Caab similarly reflects principles of De Stijl. These include rectangular surfaces, dissymmetry, and compositional elements of straight lines in walkways that surround the rectangular surfaces. Opposition occurs with the variation of light intensity on surfaces between that of the light boxes, solid table, chairs and floor (Fig. 29). The *exhibiting platforms* in Museum van de Caab facilitate the dialogue between the exhibition spaces and the exhibition content. These panels and display cases create asymmetrical planes within their composition against the backdrop of the wall and floor. The use of modern materials in this regard enhances the historical experience by creating tension between the content and building (Randle: 2013). These mechanisms form an integral part in communicating messages and meanings to viewers through participation and engagement of the senses. In elevation, these platforms become a composition of straight lines and rectangular surfaces. The opposition the authentic material matter and primary colours with each other, and the glass panels contrasted with the textured backdrop creates aesthetic balance. Wine tasting confronts the senses touch, taste and smell. Engaging with the bodily senses, the topistic characteristics of the farm is grounded within the occupant on a *multi-sensory level*, establishing meaning and affirming cultural significance of the locale.



Figure 29: Topography within Museum van de Caab



### 3. CONCLUSION

Various inquiries into the analysis and design of meaningful and sensory environments are being made. These inquiries however, seem to be lacking in the discipline of interior architecture. Indeed Shirazi points out that these phenomenological readings remain to a large extent still readings from 'without' focusing on the exterior (Shirazi, 2009:83). Equal focus should be given to interior interpretations, which become necessary in this regard. This requires the revision of interior-design curricula, probing this type of research to provide a set of guiding principles for multi-sensory design grounded in phenomenology. Through the cases of Museum van de Caab and Castelvechio, this paper indicated how such principles may be developed by adopting the philosophy of 'small narratives', and referring to the principles of *neoplasticism*, *stratification* and attention to *detailing*, in order to provide *multi-sensory* engaging interiors whose cultural significance resonates within the occupant.

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